

## The Devil's Due

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### Chapter one: Donald's Parents

They were late for the return bus home, as they knew they would be. Having stayed after quitting time at work, for a few hours of desperately needed overtime. But it was worth it. Donald would be able to have a fine education, and rise out of this limited, unsecured lifestyle. Thomas Lemore put his arm around his wife, looking into her warm brown eyes. He gave her a bright smile, "Well dear, ready for a nice walk home again." Jeannette returned the smile and replied, "Sure, but only if we take the scenic route, I get bored so easily." They both laughed as they started walking down the street. On this side of town, there was not much scenery other than working factory buildings and condemned ones.

"We are so lucky to have Mae watch Donny for us after school, so we can both work. She is such a gem." said Jeanette. Watching her husband for his response. "Yes indeed she is a gem, and I've been thinking. We should do something special for her. She does so much for us and others in the community. Perhaps we could take her out for a special day, just for her." Looking over at his wife he added, "What do you think darling, silly idea or what?" As she smiled from ear to ear, she replied, "I think that is an absolutely wonderful idea honey, let's work out the details when we get home OK?" Her eyes full of excitement at the thought. Thomas beaming with a warm loving smile added, "We have a date me lady, shall we meet in our room at say 8:30 then?" Jeanette playing coy, answers, "I think that can be arranged Mr. Lemore, if you promise to keep your hands to yourself...at least until we have finished our business." Both laughed, "Yes ma'am." Thomas replied.

Thomas always kept his wife close to him when walking home from work, and his hunting knife even closer. He knew that there were drug dealers and other bad elements lurking about in those abandoned buildings. He has seen strung out junkies desperate for a fix, try to manhandle passersby for money. He would never concede to such a demand. Just a couple of more blocks, and they would be clear of the more dangerous zone.

They heard the sound of a can being kicked ahead of them, just around the corner at the end of the block. Then, there was the crashing sound of a bottle being smashed angrily against a wall. A voice spoke out, "Not a god damn drop in that bottle. I need money damn it!" As the man came from around the corner, Thomas could see he was desperate and dangerous. His hair was filthy and covered his eyes. He had a rough beard, and wore a tattered set of army fatigues. There was a tattoo of an English Bulldog on his right arm, under which were the words "Semper Fidelis." He looked at the couple and said, "Good evening folks. I'm sure you won't mind helping out a war vet down on his luck, say 20 bucks."

"I don't think so sir. Now please step aside." Thomas replied in a strong voice. "Oh...oh...step aside say you then huh? OK...now how about you just give me everything, wallet, watch, rings...everything." Reaching into his jacket, the man pulled out a pistol and pointed it at the couple. "NOW!, or so help me, I'll take the lady off at the knees right in front of you Mr. Do-gooder!" Thomas knew they were in trouble and had to wait for an opening to use his knife, if at all. "OK...OK...calm down, here are my wallet and watch, take them, that should be plenty to get what you need." Neither Thomas nor Jeannette wanted to turn over their wedding rings, they just meant so much to them both. The man was getting angrier, drunk with his power over the couple. He loaded the chamber of the pistol with a loud chi-clang. It was a 45 caliber pistol, a powerful handgun capable of doing much damage, especially at this close range.

"Give me the rings now!, I won't ask again...next time I'll let my friend here do the asking!" the mans hands were shaking as he pointed the gun from one to the other. He looked like he was ready to lose control. "Here is my ring, it's OK fella, it's OK....give him your ring honey." Thomas tried to relay the urgency of the situation to his wife in his tone, and did not look at her directly, but it was too late. "I will never give this piece of gutter trash my wedding ring...war veteran my ass. Just a common junkie after a fix, too lazy to get a real job and work for a living!" Thomas's eyes grew wide as he watched the madman turn the gun to his wife, and without flinching shot her right in the middle of her forehead. Her body being flung back by the sheer force of the bullet's impact. Thomas heard a wet splashing sound from behind him, and he knew his wife was dead, her brains splattering the wall and sidewalk.

Thomas pulled his hunting knife from its sheath behind him and charged forward, stabbing the man deep in the chest. As he screamed at him, "You son of a bitch!...You son of a bitch...you killed my wife!!...You filthy son of a bitch!!!" The two men fell to the ground in a bloody ball. The gunman put the gun under Thomas's ribs, letting loose two shots, as Thomas gave one last hard slash across the gunman's throat. The man immediately stopped fighting and lie there dead, blood gushing from his neck and chest. The air was thick with the smell of gunpowder and a musky, almost metallic, smell of hot human blood as it steamed off of the bodies into

the cold fall air. Being mortally wounded himself, Thomas crawled over to where his wife's body lie in a pool of blood. Her eyes were still open, but showed no emotion, as motionless and lifeless as plastic dolls eyes. Thomas placed his right hand over her eyes, and closed them. "I love you so much Jeannette...I'm sooo sorr...." Thomas Lemore died before he could finish his declaration to his wife. His head resting on her blood-soaked chest, his eye's slowly closed as the last tears he would ever cry seeped out, trickling down to rest on his wife's body.

The rain felt cool on the young boy's face as he stood defiantly away from the protection of the umbrella, that his aunt Mae was trying to shelter him with. He knew the rain would conceal his tears, his pain, to all those around him. He was not going to let that happen. He was never going to be weak again. Lightning flashed in the distance, splashing the landscape. As if God were taking pictures of the event. He would not put his trust in God or man after this day. If there was really a god, then why did he take his parents from him in such a cruel and violent way? Before he could grow up and reward their love. He was going to go to college, make them proud. He was going to take care of them, give them all that they gave up so that he could have an education, and a better life than they did.

He knew that the adults would be ending the funeral soon, it was becoming too dangerous with a thunderstorm rolling in. He thought to himself, maybe it would not be so bad to have it end here and now. However, that would be weak, and he was never going to be weak again....ever. As his aunt hurried him to the car, he took one last look over his shoulder. Lightning lit up the tombstone epitaph, as if his parents were saying goodbye to him... 'Lemore...Thomas H. & Jeannette M., 'Beloved Husband/Wife/Mother/Father'. He whispered aloud to the grave, "Goodbye mom and dad. I will make you proud of me....you'll see...I promise." That boy was me, Donald Frederick Lemore, and this is my story.

After the death of my parents, it was agreed by the state that my aunt Mae would have custody of me. My aunt fought hard for it, being my mother's sister and a church-going woman. She felt it her duty as a Christian to do so. I did not mind Aunt Mae. She was a good woman and could bake the best oatmeal cookies anyone had ever tasted. She won the first prize at the county fair for her cookies every year for as long as I can remember. She lived alone now, but was never really alone since she was such an active community member. Many people in this town knew her and loved her for her kind heart, gentle words and outrageous cooking. Her husband had died in that Vietnam War. She never spoke to me about it, and I had enough respect for her not to ask. I could see the deep look of sorrow and loneliness etched on her face any time she looked at one of many pictures of him, that were hung or placed around the house. She would make sure that I was almost always busy doing something constructive with my free time when I was not studying for school. "Idle hands are the devil's playground," she was fond of saying to me.

I did not tell Aunt Mae or anyone else, for that matter, that I had lost any faith I had in god the day my mom and dad were brutally murdered. As far as my dear old Aunt Mae knew, I was her sister's darling little boy who went to church with her every Sunday, sang hymns and prayed every day. These things were meaningless to me anymore. If the adults wanted to be

foolish enough to think that god was out there looking over them and protecting them every day, that's fine. As for me, I knew better than that now. There was just good, bad and evil. This I knew because I had felt evil. I felt it when it comes in.....the Wave.

## Chapter 2: P.F.C., Anthony J. Pruitt, 1946-1971

A police investigation turned up that the gunman really was a marine. He was Private First Class, Anthony J. Pruitt, United States Marine Corps. It would only be fair to Mr. Pruitt to tell of the circumstances that led up to the crime that would put an end to his tormented mind. He had enlisted in the Marines shortly after the Vietnam war broke out. He was an honor student in high school and a very patriotic young man. He felt it his duty to enlist in the Marines, and fight for his country. He almost immediately got the English Bulldog tattoo with the words "Semper Fidelis" beneath it. The English Bulldog was deeply rooted in the Marine Corps. During WWII, the Germans referred to the Marine Corps as "teufel hunden", meaning "devil dogs," undoubtedly referring to their fighting ability. Marines are known to have a fierce almost fanatical loyalty to their duty. They are one of the most highly respected fighting forces on earth. "Semper Fidelis" is ... Translated from Latin; "Always Faithful."

Just after one month in Vietnam, he was captured along with two of his comrades in arms. After waking to find himself naked and strapped down to a table. He saw his two comrades, one to his left and the other to his right. Both were strapped to a table, just as he was, and both were dead. There was a large pool of crimson red blood under each table, entrails dangling from their sides, lying on the floor beneath them. He could see a hole about the size of a mans fist in the side of the corpse to his right. "You are awake, GI Joe, good," a Viet Cong soldier was standing in front of him. The man was standing under a single light bulb, hanging from the ceiling by a thick cord. He stood just in front of the light, so as his features could not be seen, a faceless talking shadow-man.

"You will tell me where your troops are located, yes GI Joe?," a puff of smoke billowed up around his head from an unseen cigarette in his mouth. Although terrified, private Pruitt remained silent, determined not to betray his Platoon or his country. "OK GI Joe, we will see how brave you are," snapping his fingers into the air above his head. Giving what sounded like an order to some unseen ally. Out of the shadows stepped another Viet Cong soldier, in his hands was a small metal cage about 10 inches in width and height. There was a movement from within the cage, Pvt Pruitt could hear a low squeaking sound. As the cage came closer to him, he could now see that it was a very large and nervous rat.

"You will tell me where your troops are located, GI Joe," pausing for an answer. "Very well GI Joe, you may join your friends. This will be most unpleasant for you GI Joe." The shadow-man snapped his fingers once more. The other soldier lowered the cage down and placed it on Pvt

Pruitt's stomach. The rat became more agitated sensing the mans body so close to it. "Now GI Joe, I will explain, you see your new friend has not eaten in days, and the guards like to poke at him with sticks and cigarettes." Pruitt was so scared he could hardly speak. He felt he was going to defecate uncontrollably. He surprised even himself to hear his words come out, "Go to hell you filthy gook." Those words would seal his fate forever.

"You will die screaming, like the pig that you are GI Joe," snapping his fingers again. The soldier returned from the shadows once more, this time carrying a thick black cast-iron pot. It was filled with red hot coals, and a pair of metal tongs. "Now GI Joe...next we will place the hot coals on top of the cage. The intense heat will make your new friend go crazy. He will do anything to escape from the cage before he catches on fire and burns to death. And do remember GI Joe, he is very hungry as I have mentioned." Raising his hand and waiving it through the air, speaking to the other soldier, he says, "Remove the tray." The soldier slowly slides a metal tray that was separating the rat in the cage from Pvt Pruitt's stomach.

The rat immediately started biting and gnawing at Pruitt's stomach, burrowing into him. The crazed rat frantically trying to get away from the searing heat of the red hot coals. Pruitt screamed in pain and terror as he could feel the rat beginning to enter his stomach. Blood sprayed out of the wound, the rat chewing and scratching feverishly to escape. Pruitt's screams filled the small shack. Suddenly, there was a tremendous explosion. The soldiers, Pvt Pruitt and the cage with the rat in it sent flying through the air in a storm of dirt, wood and rock. A large mortar round struck just short of the bamboo shed that he was being held captive in. Within minutes American troops were all over the area. It was not just the one shed, but an entire Viet Cong stronghold. No doubt a major target for our troops if they were to move onward.

Pruitt slowly lifted his head. The right side of his face badly burned by the explosion. The hair singed completely off of his head.

He could see a viet cong soldier officer a few feet away from him, a large bamboo pole impaling the man's stomach, exiting through his neck. A cigarette still burned in his mouth, held tightly in between his teeth. The shadow-man no doubt, Pruitt whispered, "Good for you, you son of a bitch. I hope you burn in hell." One of the American soldiers sifting through the rubble notices Pruitt and yells, "Medic!...I need a medic over here...we've got wounded!" Just before passing out, Pruitt manages to look up at the G.I calling for help, "Thank you..." One of the other soldiers looks over, "Jesus Christ. This was one of those rat rooms. They were using rats on them to get information." From behind him could be heard the sound of a soldier vomiting.

Private Pruitt would spend a year in a military hospital for his wounds and convalescing. The surgeons at a M.A.S.H unit had to remove the dead rat's body from within Pruitt's stomach, killed by the concussion of the blast. Private Pruitt himself suffered from three fractured ribs, a broken leg, a sprained wrist and two missing fingers. He also had to have numerous pieces of debris removed, which became shrapnel after the mortar attack. However, the most damage he incurred was to his face. His right eye was completely gone, and the entire upper-

right side of his face was horribly scarred by burns. Aside from screaming in the night, Pruitt never spoke a word to anyone at the hospital. When told his family was being notified, he went into a rage, until he was assured they would not come to see him, not until he was ready.

As it turned out Pvt. Anthony J Pruitt would never be ready to see his family, or have any kind of social life resembling normal. He could not recover mentally from his horrific ordeal, or the terrible scars which had changed his body. He felt as though he was the phantom of the opera, every time he looked into a mirror. The sight of himself only deepening his mental condition, his was a mind tortured by memories and by the physical pain left behind by his injuries. Private Pruitt would never live a normal life ever again. He would become one of the forgotten ones, slowly pushed away, unwanted by society. The victim of an unpopular war that nobody wanted. He was a symbol of something people wanted to forget, and so he was not treated as the hero whom he might have been, but as a hideous reminder of a wounded country.

He became addicted to painkillers in the hospital. When he was released, he wandered the streets, not knowing where to go, where to call home. He began drinking any kind of alcohol that he could lay his hands on. Between the pain pills, which the government paid for, and the alcohol which he spent every cent he had on, he became a zombie. He was like so many others that returned home to be scorned and ridiculed. He became one of the walking dead. A creation of war, not only the horrors that were part of war itself, but the inevitable reaction to it when it was over. Some wars receive acclaim and praise. Parades marched down main street for the returning heroes. Some wars receive protests, anger and rejection of those who fought in them.

And so, that October night, three lives were laid to waste. All due to the insanity of war, and all the injustices it provokes. It would appear that our country could spare no expense to create greater weapons of war. However, no amount of money could cure the wounds, or the true damages incurred by it. These things hopefully, would just be forgotten in time. Them being more of an embarrassment than a real issue that needed to be addressed. Perhaps one-day men of all races, creeds and religions, will find a way to solve their differences through a forum of words and agreeable pacts. One must admit, that for a so called civilized society, we certainly do our very best to find new and devastating ways to take human life.

Rest in peace, Private First Class, Anthony Joseph Pruitt

### Chapter 3: The Wave; Touched by Evil

As a young boy I hated Autumn, the season known as Fall. There are many reasons, the foremost being, it is the season in which both my parents were brutally murdered; good enough reason to hate any season I guess. However, I hated fall for more reasons than just

this. It was the end of Summer, the season that is so alive with blooming flowers, trees, birds singing and animals abundantly running about. Fall had a more devious and ominous message. It foretold of the coming of Winter, a cold and brutal season in itself, which would steal the life of anyone foolish enough to misjudge its powers.

Fall meant the leaves would begin to change in color from the luscious green of life, to the blood Red, Orange and Yellow color of flames. The country side looked as though the flames of Hell had themselves come to consume us all. And yet all the people were slowly lulled into its grasp by the unassuming beauty it put before them. I would NOT be lulled such as they were. I saw the fall for what it was; death, the murder of Summer and the trees, the banishment of the animals to exile in their shelters. And what was left after those pretty little deceiving leaves had all fallen to the ground, barren and dead looking trees and bushes. A skeletal semblance of what they once were, now the air seems to put a malevolent chill in your bones, and the darkness sneaks in early upon us, in a wave of tacit intentions. Perhaps you also have felt this silent, yet palpable insidiousness that resides within the darkness of Fall; The Wave.

The Wave would catch us all off guard, people still at work would now have to go home in the dark. It is an eerie thing, how it is only in the Fall, when we notice that dark, ominous rogue wind. It seems to come from out of nowhere, sending a cold chill down our spines. It spooks the people into looking over their shoulders before entering their vehicles, or their homes. The wave also affected students staying late at school. They would be more vigilant, keeping a wary eye out for child molesters and abductors of children, for whatever sinister reasons they might have. Children who were already at home from school, would be called to come in from play earlier now....all because of the wave. No one speaks of these feelings we have, but oh, how we do all feel them. That strange feeling, that something is just not right. That it is not as safe, as it were. That something lurks out there, in the darkness of Fall. Why do you think it is the time of Halloween, a time for Witches and Warlocks, Goblins and Ghouls, Demons and the Devil? It is a time when we celebrate.....Evil.

This particular fall day was exactly that holiday...Halloween. It is a time of scary costumes of Vampires, Werewolves, Mummies, Skeletons, Witches and Ghouls. A time of Trick or Treat, and late-night parties for the adults, set in Gothic horror scenery. Aunt Mae did not care for the theme of the holiday, but she enjoyed giving out her homemade oatmeal cookies to the kids who came knocking at the door. "Donald, oh Donald dear, would you please come in here for a moment child!" A small sense of urgency could be detected in her voice. It was best to come quickly and not dawdle when she gets that tone, or you might find yourself on the receiving end of one of those, "Idle hands...blah...blah...blah..", speeches again. "Yes Aunt Mae, is everything OK?," Entering the kitchen, I could see she was baking and more likely than not, ran out of one of the ingredients again. "Well Donald, yes and no dear. I am baking cookies for the trick-or-treater's, and I'm almost completely out of flour." Turning to look at the boy, she says sweetly, "Would you be a sweetheart and run down to the corner store to get me a new bag?" The woman's face just radiated warm kindness.

"Why sure Aunt Mae, I can do that, no problem ma'am!" His aunts face showing a little bit of concern, and guilt perhaps as she adds, "Now Donald, ordinarily I would never send you out after dark. However, today I know that there are lots of kids and their parents all over the streets, and I imagine a good supply of police also. And it is just on the corner, so no dilly-dallying young man" A little innocent smile draping her rosy red cheeks. "Yes ma'am, I'll be OK...I promise to be careful, and no dally-dillying either!" I ran to the corner store weaving my way through groups of children out trick-or-treating. Most of them were with their parents just like Aunt Mae said they would be, but some of the older ones were alone, but in groups. They wore costumes of Vampires and witches, zombies, the Frankenstein Monster. One was even dressed up as Casper the friendly ghost. I don't believe in any such thing as a ghost that is friendly, if it's a ghost..., you had better run, and fast because I guarantee you it's anything but friendly! As I dashed inside the store, I looked up at the next couple of blocks beyond the corner store. I noticed that the groups of kids thinned out quickly, with almost none at all on the second block up. It was probably because it was nearly the end of town, with a used car dealership and a pharmacy on the last block. There were a few houses, but none seemed to be as lit up as the ones on this block. No Halloween pumpkins lit up on the porch, or even a porch light left on to show a sign welcoming the trick-or-treaters. And the street lights seemed dimmer, in part since after the last block, there were no more street lights at all.

I ran to the aisle with the flour Aunt Mae needed, I knew every aisle by heart after so many years of running to the store for her when she ran out of one of her baking needs. "Woe now little feller! What's the big rush? You got one of them there monsters on your tail or what Donny boy!" Mr. Perkins the store owner asked me as I nearly slammed into the counter where he stood. "Sorry Mr. Perkins, Aunt Mae is baking cookies for the kids, and she ran out of flour!" my cheeks flushed red with embarrassment for the tender scolding he gave me. "Oh, well that explains it then, we had better not keep your aunt waiting, or we'll both end up getting a lecture, huh son?" Mr. Perkins winked at me as he gave me my change, to show no harm was done, and that I could calm down and not feel bad about running in his store. I walked as slowly as I could force myself until I reached the door, then I hit high gear and was off like a shot. I left the store running so fast that I ran straight into a man wearing a long black coat. I got scared, but relaxed when I looked up and saw that white collar standing out in the streetlights, it was a priest.

"Sorry father, my aunt ran out of flour for her cookies. She gives them to the trick-or-treater's every year." Once again, rosy red cheeks adorned my face. "Oh, I see...and you have come to save the day. Well, then I say bravo for you, young man." Still embarrassed over this second clumsy mishap due to my reckless running. "Thank you sir." I said, slowly looking up at the man whom I nearly sent flying through the air, as if he were the head pin on a bowling alley. I could see that he was middle aged, with mostly gray hair, which was tucked neatly under a fine dress hat of black. It seemed a bit too large around the brim, reminding me of the old hats the Pilgrims wore. "So, tell me young man, aren't you afraid to be out here alone in the dark. Is it that you fear no evil because God walks with you?" He had a warm and friendly face, and I felt very calm in his presence. I found it hard to answer his question, knowing he would be disappointed in me. However, I was taught not to lie, and I was not going to start



now, especially to a priest. Regardless of my inner feelings, there was a matter of respect involved here. "Well sir...umm...you a priest and I was taught never to lie to anyone, let alone a man of the cloth as Aunt Mae sometimes says." My eyes were now looking down, at the ground. "That sounds like fair enough advice to me son, what is it, what troubles you my boy?" The priest reached down and gently touched my chin with his thumb and forefinger, raising my eyes to meet his own.

"My parents were killed sir...murdered in cold blood. And they were good and honest church going people sir." The priest's eyes studied my own before he spoke again. "I see, and is there more you wish to tell me but are afraid? Have no fear of me young man, I am not here to judge you, that is not my job. You should not be afraid to speak what is in your heart, particularly if it is something that you feel very strongly about." Adding, "Especially not to one such as me, speak your mind son, it will be good for your soul." The priest gave me a warm reassuring smile as he tilted his head slightly upward, signaling me to finish my statement. "Yes sir, I mean no disrespect toward you sir, but I don't believe in god anymore. God would not have let that happen to them if he really was god, if he truly did exist, he would have stopped it." I met the priest's eyes firmly now with my own, full of conviction and defiance of all the things this man held true.

Still smiling down at me, he said, "Ahhh, I can understand your thinking that way, but don't you think that perhaps in the future you may have a change of heart?" He was studying my eyes again, and I snapped out a quick reply. "No sir, I'm sorry but no sir....never." The priest now moved his thumb and forefinger up to his own chin, in a gesture, as if he were contemplating something to himself. "Let me ask you this then son. What about the devil, don't you fear he may move in on you, now that you have lost your faith?" He was once again studying my eyes. "Well sir, I don't believe in the devil either. I think that there is good and that there is evil, but there is no god and no devil." As the priest tilted his head from side to side and looked upward for a fleeting moment. "Hmm...well that is an interesting point of view, and I must say that I surely will not try to change your mind right now."

Placing a hand on my shoulder he asked, "What is your name son, if I may be so bold as to ask?" He gave me that warm face again. Looking at him dead in the eyes with all the pride I could muster, I replied, "Donald Frederick Lemore, sir." The priest put his other hand out as if to shake hands, "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Donald Frederick Lemore, and a fine and noble name you have there, I might add." The priest straightened himself and put out his chest to show his sincerity. I reached out and grabbed his hand and shook it as firmly as I could. Suddenly, I felt myself smiling from ear to ear with pride. I felt a small glow of strength inside of me, as if I had made a new friend who was strong and respected me. "Thank you sir, it's nice to meet you too sir."

"Are you a smart boy, do you do well in school?" he asked. "Oh yes sir, I'm a straight 'A' student, and I work odd jobs to make money for college when I'm not studying." He looked down at me with the same face that Aunt Mae gets when she is about to give a verbal lesson. "That is excellent. You know Donald that a hard-working man can get very wealthy fast. And an affluent man depends on no one but himself. He is independent, stands on his own two

feet and speaks his mind. The same as you are doing here and now Donald." I liked the sound of that, I thought to myself. That is the kind of man I want to be alright. To be as hard working as my dad, and as outspoken as my mom. They sure made a great team, how my heart longed to have them back. But I will make them proud of me. I will not let them down.

"I've always worked hard sir, and my aunt tells me all the time that idle hands is the devil's playground." I was feeling proud again. "And right she is my boy, right she is. I'll tell you what my new young friend, you keep working as hard as you possibly can, and I'll keep doing what I do best. What do you say, do we have a deal?" The priest put his hand back out to shake and seal the pact. I grabbed his hand firmly and shook it. "Yes sir, it's a deal!...well I had better get going home now or my aunt Mae will skin me alive sir!" I knew my fast running would make up for most of the lost time, but I couldn't push it any further than this. "Certainly Donald, I understand. Actually, I too must be moving on. I feel a calling for my services nearby." The priest lifted his head in the direction of the blocks further up ahead. "Goodbye sir, and thank you for the talk!"

Running off down the block back to Aunt Mae's house, I hardly heard his last words to me. However, I know that I felt proud and also with a bit more inner strength that I just know I received from this priest. He seems to have cemented my goals even more securely in my heart. As if him having faith in me and praising me, has passed some of his inner strength on to me. It was a good feeling, a strong feeling, and I liked it.

#### Chapter 4: The Priest Hears a Calling.

The night air is cool as the priest watches the young boy running home with his bag of flour. He whispers to himself "He will do fine, just fine...now" Turning back in the direction of the last block. A firm look replacing that warm face the boy had been looking at. Now it was a face of a man who was all business, and no man could have looked more serious than he did at that moment. He was a man on a mission, and it would be fulfilled. It was after all...what he did best. He turned his focus to the pharmacy near the end of the block. As he approached the pharmacy door, he raised his right hand and snapped his fingers, as if a magician calling for his assistant to come over and help with his next trick. The night fell silent as he stepped through the door and entered the pharmacy.

Once he was in the store, he could see the pharmacist with both hands raised above his head. There were only two other people in the store, both men in their thirties, and both holding guns pointed at the pharmacist. It was obvious that the pharmacy was being robbed. The priest continued walking right up to the two gunmen, as if it was exactly what he had expected to find. There was no fear on his face, no sweat from apprehension. Just that cold

serious look of a man on a mission, a mission that he knew, he would not fail. "Are you gentlemen sure that this is the path you wish to take?"

The two men were standing in front of the priest, one to his left near the wall, and the other to his right about two feet from the pharmacist. The two men seemed amazed that the priest had just come in and walked straight up to them. But they were not intimidated or repentant in the least. The man on the left spoke first, spitting out his words with venom in them, "Shut the hell up, you god damn bible thumping freak." Both men were moving their guns back and forth between the pharmacist and the priest. The timing seemed almost perfect as they switched off between the two targets. It appeared that they had plenty of practice at this sort of thing in the past. The gunman on the right spoke next, "I ain't never killed any priest before preacher man, but makes no never-mind to me. So stay perfectly still, and you just might live."

Suddenly, the pharmacist quickly reaches down and comes up with his own pistol. He takes two fast shots, one at each of the robbers. The first bullet smashes into a glass cooler door, plowing through a tray of soft drinks. Glass shattering to the floor, mixed in a waterfall of flavors, orange, grape, lime. The second bullet punches a hole just a few inches from the man on the left, causing him to flinch and yell out, "What the hell..." He quickly fires three shots into the pharmacist's chest, sending him sprawling backwards through the air. His arms flailing, he crashes through a display case behind him. More glass shatters as his body comes to rest with him sitting inside of the display case. His legs sticking out the front, one pant-leg pushed awkwardly up to the knee. Both of his arms were still raised, long shards of glass from the top of the display case stabbing through his hands and wrists. The pistol falling from his hand, landing between his legs with a thud. His hands fall over limp, as the blood streamed down over his body, his white pharmacist jacket now more red than white. A bloodied marionette, waiting for someone to pull his strings and reanimate him.

"Now you have both sealed your fate." The priest said, a look of content and approval on his face. The man on the right immediately replies, "And yours preacher man, rule number one, no witnesses." Now the man on the left turned to face the priest, his adrenaline still pumping hard from shooting the pharmacist. "No more talk, time for you to meet your maker bible thumper!" His pistol pointing directly at the priest's chest, he squeezes the trigger three quick times. The man looks down at his gun in disbelief as it does not fire but just makes three clicking sounds. "Jesus Christ, are you kidding me, I know damn well I fully loaded in the car before we came in here." The priest raises his left hand and waives it in front of the man on the left. "Hold that thought son, you and I have unfinished business. Which of course, we will attend to shortly."

Walking over so that he was standing directly in front of the man on the right. "I see you're having trouble moving, don't fight it son. It's bigger than both of us. As you can see, your friend over there has the very same problem. Maybe it is something in the air perhaps. Now you stay here. I promise to return shortly, right after I teach your companion some proper manors." The gunman on the right was petrified in place, the only thing he could move was his eyes. He could see that the other gunman was also frozen and could not move. So still

that he could be mistaken for a store mannequin. All he could do was watch and listen. He wished that he could close his eyelids, wishing he did not have to see what was about to happen to his friend. His instincts, and his heart told him that it was not going to be good or pleasant.

Little did he know just how right he was. Walking calmly back over to the man on the left, the priest looks at the man with a disappointed look on his face. "You my son, are absolutely lacking in any respect for the cloth I see. Well, I guess I can't hold that against you." Now the priest waived his hand once again in front of the man. Feeling himself free to move, he yells at the priest, "I'll cut your heart out and feed it to piece by piece you freak. All you goody-two-shoes preachers belong in hell." Smiling, the priest replies, "I have to agree with you there, but I must take offense to your threatening to cut my heart out." The man still in disbelief over his gun not firing, quickly fires three more times at the priest. This time the gun does fire, slamming three bullets directly into the priest's chest. Blood begins pouring out of the wounds, soaking into the priest's uniform.

The priest takes a step backwards as the bullet's pound into his chest, but does not go down. In fact, he responds by taking two steps forward, closer to the gunman. "Well I'll be a son of a bitch. You were right son. It was fully loaded. Hasn't anyone ever told you not to play with guns, you could get hurt." A look of mock humor on his face now changes to a look of anger, and of pure evil incarnate. His eyes begin to glow red, slowly changing until an intensely bright amber. He slowly turns his eyes to the gun in the mans hand. The gunman tries to throw away the gun as it begins to heat up in his hand, but he is unable to. A look of fear turns to terror, as the gun becomes hotter and hotter. Smoke rising from his hand as the gun changes into a ball of molten red hot steel in his hand. The sickening odor of burning flesh permeating through the air, as the gunman's screams of agony echo throughout the store. His friend watching helplessly, his gun fully loaded and still in his hand. Terror now filling his own eyes, as he watched in horror.

Screaming and grasping his left wrist with his right hand, the gun finally drops from the mans hand to the floor, a red ball of steaming metal. His hand reduced to a disfigured lump flesh, bone and blood. His eyes full of pain and insane anger, he pulls a large knife from behind his back and screams at the priest, "I'll kill you!...I'll kill you!" Leaping forward, he charges at the priest. He shoves out his hand with the knife, burying it deep into the priest's chest, straight into his heart. Blood sprays from the wound, covering the mans face and chest. The priest does not falter from his position, standing firmly in place as if nothing had happened to him at all. He reaches down with his left hand grasping not the knife sticking out of his chest, but the mans hand who was still clutching the knife. He pulls the mans hand slowly from the knife, but does not let go of his hand. Reaching over with his right hand, the priest grabs the handle of the knife and slowly pulls it out of his chest. The blood no longer flowing from any of his gunshot wounds or the knife wound.

The priest's voice changing, becoming deeper and inhuman....demonic. "Now it is my turn, you pathetic little worm. When I am finished with you, you will have a new home...with me." He begins to tighten his grip on the gunman's hand, squeezing it tighter and tighter. There is the sound of cracking and breaking bones as the priest crushes every single bone in the man's hand, some of them popping right out of his skin from the immense pressure being applied to them. A look of sheer terror, anguish and torture masking the man's face as it contorts to this new agony. He can barely utter a sound at this point. His body wracked with pain. His heart filled with fear. His body going limp, his feet hardly touching the ground as he looks down and then back up at the priest. Without any effort at all, the man's weight was being totally supported by the priest's hand that was crushing his own. Suspending him there so that he would not fall to the floor...not yet that is.

Now with his right hand still holding the bloody knife that he pulled from his own heart, the priest holds it up in front of the man's eyes. A low guttural snicker creeps from his mouth, which has become filled with brown pointy teeth and a tongue as black as coal. He seemed to slowly be changing right before both the man's eyes, becoming something not human at all. He eases the knife lower until it is just above the man's left hip, then he softly moves the tip of the knife until it is pushing against the man's skin, but not piercing through it. He looks at the man dangling in front of him, then down at the knife, and gives a small nod of his head up and down, as if asking the man if this is the right spot. "Please don't, please...I'm begging you. I'll do anything you want." The man cried out in a whisper. The priest just gave him an evil smile. He slowly pushes the knife into the man's lower abdomen. Blood immediately pours from the wound as the man's body jerks backwards from the sharp pain of the knife entering him. His mouth wide open, gasping for air in loud pants of searing pain. The priest begins slowly moving the knife to the right and upward, looking deep into the man's eyes. His head tilted slightly to the side, a smile and look of content on his face, as if he wanted to savor every moment of this man's death.

Blood and internal organs spewing out from the deep gash as it ripped through his stomach. The man gasping louder and louder, trying desperately to shove the intestines and organs back into himself with his mutilated hand. As the knife reaches the top of the man's ribcage, the priest releases the man's hand. His body hits the floor with a splat, as it lands in a pool of blood and entrails. Falling backwards, leaning against the wall behind him. He slides down to the floor, his head and neck bent upward on the wall. Neck broken from the fall, his eyes staring in a lifeless last look of terror. "There will be plenty of time for begging where you are going." Now turning around to face the other gunman. Taking off his large black hat and letting it fall behind his head, a choker cord around his neck preventing it from falling to the floor. His hair was all gray except for a few locks at each temple. They were a reddish yellow and orange tint. "No witnesses, I believe that is what you last said to me, is it not you fool?" The gunman having just witnessed what happened to his accomplice, could not run, he could not fire his gun. He could only watch in horror, knowing that he was going to be next. The priest did not walk over to him, but seemed to glide across the floor on a cushion of air. Standing directly in front of him now, so close he could smell the foul breath coming from the

priest's mouth. It was the putrid odor of a dead animal lying by the side of the road baking in the sun, rotten, disgusting...nauseating.

The man's eyes grew wide at the sight of this creature that had just minutes ago been a human priest. There was a ripping, cracking noise as sharp yellowish-brown horns started to push their way through the priest's skull on the left and right sides. His head was shaking violently, and a low growling sound came from him, as if a mad dog shaking a bone in his mouth. His nose was growing larger too. It was becoming bigger and blackening, nostrils flaring as a wet slimy ooze seemed to saturate the thing. His ears grew also, until they were too large, distorted and pointed at the top. Coarse dark hair grew from all areas of his face and head. His eyes glowed the deepest of red. He opened his mouth and a long black tongue emerged, moving through the air, a snake with a mind of its own. At the end, it split into two distinct pointed tips. A bone-chilling fear ran up the gunman's spine. He felt terror as he never knew existed at this moment. There was a wet squishy sound, and another foul odor rose into the air. The gunman realized that his bowels had released, and the smell was that of his own feces emptying into his pants. The priest waved a hand in front of the gunman, releasing him from the bonds that held him from moving. The man felt his release, and he knew this would be the only chance he would have to escape, or die trying.

Firing four shots into the creature's chest, its upper body jolting backwards as each bullet struck it. Sensing this was not going to stop the beast, the gunman fired two more shots directly into its head. As the first bullet smashed through the forehead of the creature, the second entered through the left eye. The back of the creature's skull exploding in a shower of blood, brains, hair and skull fragments. There was a loud unearthly scream of anger and pain, it shook the room so violently that items began to fall off of the shelves. The creature's head fell backwards, and it seemed for a moment it was going to topple over dead. The gunman felt a feeling of relief, thinking he had beaten the thing. Soon then the air filled with an ominous silence. The gunman watched in amazement as the creature's body straightened itself, its head slowly starting to upright itself. As the face of the thing became more visible, the man could clearly see one hole in the forehead and that the left eye was no longer ambered, but a black hole of dripping, and creeping yellow slime. There was a sound resembling raindrops beginning to fall, growing heavier, getting louder and more frequent. It was the creature's blood, brains and pieces of the skull, all being sucked through the air and back into the thing's head. It was repairing itself right before the gunman's eyes, the last thing to return was the left eyeball. The eerie red glow slowly returning, until both eyes were once again a fierce amber red. They were as bright as any light bulbs in the store, but somehow deeper...sinister.

The beast tilted its neck to the left and then to the right, cracking its neck as if to help it all settle back together more securely.

It begins moving its jaws around, as if chewing gum or trying to clear a piece of food wedged in between two teeth. Then it spat out two objects at the gunman, both bouncing off of his chest and falling to the floor. Looking down the man could see that they were the two bullets that he had fired into the beast's face. They must have been sucked back into his skull along

with everything else. The thing's mouth opened and the long black, forked tongue came slithering out. It rose up into the air slowly, side to side and up and down until it was hovering in front of the gunman, just above his head. He felt a feeling of extreme dread come over him as once again, he was frozen in place, unable to move, incapable of running or to cry out for help. He knew that he was now doomed, and could only wish that it would be over quickly. "You did not learn anything from your friend's mistake." The beast's voice was deep, raspy, inhuman and louder than any human voice that he had ever heard. It sounded as if it rose up from the depths of hell channeling through the beast, as if he were an amplifier or speaker. The gunman realized what the thing meant and quickly tried to throw away his gun, not wanting his own hand to be boiled and melted by a molten ball of steel. As hard as he tried, the gun would not release from his hand.

"It's too late for that now, little worm. You forget that you cannot move." The gunman waited in horror for the gun to heat up in his hand, but it did not. In fact, it felt rather cool to him, as a matter of fact. It felt too chilly to him as he realized it was progressively getting colder and colder. The gun became extremely icy, and very painful as it started actually to freeze in his hand. Looking down, he could see his hand was also beginning to freeze solid, turning into actual ice before him. The pain was excruciating. He tried to scream out in agonizing pain, but his mouth would not open. "I will allow you to speak dog, what do you wish to convey to me." The mans mouth was free. He let out a horrible long scream of a man being tortured. "AHH, what music to my ears you play. However, we have much more for you to learn, so shall we begin?" The beast turned its eyes to the gunman's frozen hand. He began to get a small evil smile on his face. "You no longer will be needing that. Let me help you." The beast's tongue began to coil backwards, then it bolted back as a bullwhip would. The long black tongue snapping forward directly at the mans crystallized hand, there was a loud crack as it struck his hand. Then a shattering sound, and the mans hand was gone, lying on the floor beneath him in a hundred pieces of frozen pieces of flesh. All the man could manage was a loud deep gasping sound, gripped in terror.

"Oh what wonders your eyes have seen here, and certainly you must never speak of to be sure. However, I will remedy that, just as sure as you may believe that both of your souls are now mine." The beast's long black tongue darting out, grabbing the mans chin with the two forks at the end of it, forcing him to look at the beast. "Look at me when I speak to you, you pitiful little maggot." The mans eyes slowly making eye contact with the beast's glowing red eye's, locking in place there. "Your eyes have witnessed the acts of the supreme one, and in doing so, they are now mine. Therefore, you shall see as I see, your eyes shall burn as mine burn." The beast reached out with both arms, his hands clasping the mans head between them. They were larger now. The backside covered in coarse black hair. The fingernails were dark pointed talons. The man let out a small whimper as the beast's eye began to glow more intensely now. The man could not move, his heart pounding in his ears, terror gripping his very soul. His bladder now unable to contain itself, releases a torrent of hot urine, spilling down the mans leg and running out onto the floor in a puddle.

The beast but its thumbs under each eye and slowly began to apply pressure, the man let out a blood-curdling scream as the thing's thumbs pushed into his skull. There was a moist

popping sound as his left eye popped out, followed by the right. His eyes dangling from the sockets by the optical nerves, blood vessels and nerve tissue. Blood seeping out of the sockets, slowly running down the mans face. His primordial screams filling the room, choking on little gasps of air as his body now completely out of control, tried to continue breathing. "We must make room for your new eyes." The beast's eyes begin radiating outward, two bright beams of amber red, directly into the empty eye sockets of the gunman. The man let out a shriek, and his body literally had every hair standing straight up in the air. As the beast withdrew the glowing beams from the mans head, it bore its sharp fangs in a grotesque mimic of a smile. "Ahh, much better." The mans eye sockets glowed red, brighter and brighter until they had flames dancing in them, real flames. Bringing a pain such as no ordinary man has ever suffered, not even under torturous conditions. His pain, was a soul burning pain, the pain of hell.

His head twitching violently, as much as his invisible bonds would allow. In a bizarre way, it resembled some sort of obscene bobble head doll, hair standing straight up, eyelids fluttering while flames burned inside, as his real eyes lie dangling and jiggling beneath them. While out of his mouth came his screams of unending and unearthly pain echoing through the store. "Next, we need to silence that tongue of yours. Not that I do not enjoy your screams, I can assure that I do. I will allow you to continue when you arrive at your new home. There you can join my choir, and sing your screams along with many others." The beast waves a hand in front of the mans face, his head tilting back slightly, as one might do to see better when wearing reading glasses low on their nose. "Say ahhhh," the thing whispered to the man. Its eyes studying intensely as the mans mouth opened wide, still screaming the endless scream of a suffering soul. "There is the problem, it is that tongue of yours, that is the culprit. Perhaps you need to eat something, maybe that will help." The mans screams become distorted as his tongue starts growing outward. Now elongated to almost a foot long, the mans tongue turns and begins to force itself down his throat. His screams squelched, muffled by the sound of his gagging. He was choking to death on his own tongue. The beast waved his hand again in front of the man, his body falling to the floor in a bouncing, twitching mass. Convulsing uncontrollably, until it finally had no more life in it, the flames gone out of his eyes, leaving black charred holes behind.

The beast turns toward the door, placing his hat back on his head. Instantly, his eye's no longer glowing red, but a soft blue. As his tongue was no longer a long black serpent. His hair had turned back to the gray it was before, and he was once again a human priest. His face wears a look of harmony, kindness and caring. He has the comforting and consoling look of a priest. As he walks to the door, he stops just before leaving the pharmacy. "I'll be down and personally welcome you both shortly." A thin smile embracing his lips as he steps through the door into the night air. "I feel there is much more calling for my services this evening. Ahh...Halloween and Fall, my busiest time of the year." As he walked the small locks of yellow-orange hair danced playfully along his face in the Fall breeze. As he crossed the street, and turned the corner of the block at the end of town. He raised a hand into the night and snapped his fingers, just as he did before entering the pharmacy. The night became more



alive with sounds, as if he had somehow flipped a switch and now time was allowed to move forward again after being halted for a brief moment.

There was the shrill scream of a woman from behind him, he smiled to himself. Police and ambulance sirens now filled the air as a dozen vehicles came screeching to a halt in front of the pharmacy. Two blocks away, walks a man in a priest uniform. As he walks; there is the sound of small metallic objects dropping to the ground as he steps over them. One by one, all the bullets were being purged from his chest. The wounds closing as if never there, his clothes no longer blood stained and full of holes. As they hit the ground, they gave off a small plume of smoke, rising into the cool night air. There was a sizzling sound from the sidewalk, each bullet lay on the ground glowing red hot. Almost as if each one of them had just been taken out of a furnace or kiln. They began melting into the sidewalk and disappearing forever in a little puff of smoke. In the distance, the sirens filled the night.

Captain John Williams burst through the door to the pharmacy. "OK, just what the hell was so important as to force me to leave my beautiful wife alone in a restaurant in front of our dinner. And on my god-damned wedding anniversary" Anger clearly etched on the captain's face. "There better be a good answer, or so help me somebody's going to be pushing a beat right up until retirement. I can promise you sons-a-bitches that much." Calming down enough to catch sight of the bloodbath that lies before him, the captain stops short and whispers, "What in the name of all that's holy happened in this place." Spotting one of his detectives in the middle of the mayhem, he shouts over to the man, "Shriver, over here...NOW!" Detective Shriver looks over and nods his head. He quickly walks over to his captain, notepad open in his one hand and a pen in his other. He wore a badge displaying detective, in plain sight on his belt. "What the hell happened here Bill. It looks like a massacre went on right under our very noses, and we couldn't hear it. With a patrol car not more than a hundred yards down the street, both officers with their arms crossed, talking to some woman who is complaining about egg throwing boys. Nobody hears any shots. Nobody hears any screams. Nobody hears all this glass smashing?" The detective shakes his head, beats the hell out of me sir. Both officers swear that they didn't hear a sound. As a matter of fact, all the people that were on the street at the time, said exactly the same thing when questioned. The night was quiet, except for the sounds of trick-or-treater's." The captain studies Shriver's face intently, then brushes one of his hands through his blonde hair. "It just does not make any sense. I believe what you're telling me Bill. However, it just defies all logic, all reality. OK, fill me in on what you have so far and let's move on."

"Your not gonna like it sir, it gets worse, much worse." Detective Shriver points over to two other detectives working among the small army of uniformed and plain clothed cops, police lab men, and a slew of paramedics who were standing off to the side in case needed. Detectives Palmer and Peterson over there, they pulled the video from the store security camera. "Good, good... we should be able to get something from that." The captain notices the look of disappointment on Shriver's face. "What is it Bill, what now? Are you gonna tell me there's no videotape on top of nobody in town hearing a thing while a massacre is taking place half a block away?" Detective Shriver shakes his head in disgust, " The video shows two gunmen, both holding a gun on the pharmacist. Then out of nowhere they seem to lose their

minds and start pointing their guns back and forth between the pharmacist and thin air behind them." The captain looks down at the mutilated bodies. "Are you trying to tell me that a god-damned ghost turned all these men into a bloody mess and then vanished?" Looking at the detective as if questioning the man's sanity. "No sir, I'm just giving you the facts as we have them sir. It seems the gunfire came into play after the pharmacist pulled out his own gun and started firing at the holdup men. The only problem there is...I knew Pete Wells. You did too, and he didn't like guns. He told me on more than one occasion that he would not have one, even after I had suggested he got one with drug abuse on the rise." The captain walked over to where the dead pharmacist's body lay in the glass case. There was the pistol that he was shown firing from the videotape, still lying there between his legs.

"I did more than just know Pete Wells. We went to school together. We graduated the same class. And we remained friends all through life. He was a good man, husband and father. I never told anyone this before Bill, I felt it was not my place to talk about a friend's personal feelings. But now, under the circumstances, I will tell you what made Pete dislike guns so much." The captain spoke calmly and deliberately in a soft voice to detective Shriver, "You see Bill, back when we were kids, there was a boy named Charlie Stokes. He wasn't a bad kid. He was good with his hands, liked to tinker with things and would fix all of our bikes when they broke down. Well, his father was an avid hunter and had a good-sized collection of guns. One day, his father came back from hunting, put away his guns but was called away to the phone before he locked the gun case. Young Charlie seized the moment to admire one of his father's pistols. He was turning it in his hands and must have accidentally hit the trigger with one of his fingers. The gun fired one shot. It went straight through the boy's chest, piercing his heart. He died instantly...he was Pete Wells' cousin, and they were very close."

"Detective Shriver closed his eyes, "God, no wonder the man hated guns his entire life. So then, if he never owned a gun, or would even touch one...where the hell did that pistol he fired come from sir?" The captain looked at Shriver, "I don't know Bill, but I am sure as hell going to find out." He started to turn back to the pistol that was lying between Pete Wells' legs, "Get this gun down to the lab. You get me every bit of information that you can on it. Make sure that the lab boys pull out all the stops. I want to know where the hell that gun came from, and how Pete Wells got his hands on it." Looking down at the gun, the captain's eyes widened. The gun was gone, seeming to have just vanished. "What the hell is going on here, it was there no more than two minutes ago? You and I are the only two people close enough to remove it, and we did not. How the hell does a gun simply disappear into thin air Bill?" The detective looks down in disbelief, "This is too weird sir. I don't know. I just don't know" The two policemen just stared at each other. Neither one speaks.

## Chapter 5; Nightmares

The plane touched down on the runway. Almost immediately the blue sky turned dark as night. A flash of lightning so bright and blinding shot down from the darkness, spraying

tentacles of electricity around the airplane. The ground beneath us seemed to shake, as a breathtaking clap of thunder boomed through the air around us. Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the phenomenon was gone. The skies were once again blue, there were no clouds to be seen in any direction, no distant rumbles of thunder. Odd I thought to myself, looking for a similar response from any of the other passengers. All of the other passengers seemed to be totally unaffected by the strange occurrence. One might think that I was the only passenger whom even experienced it, but that's silly. Anyway I have business to attend to here, so enough mind wandering and get back to business Donald Lemore.

As I stepped off of the plane, looking around me. I saw nothing unusual, but a rather modest town It seemed odd to me that there would be an airport in the middle of a small town, but then we live in an odd world. Besides, I have a business meeting to attend to here, and that is all that matters. I had no luggage to pick up, only the suitcase in my hand carrying business material concerning this transaction. I walked through the tiny airport to the exit doors and stepped outside. There was no loading or unloading signs, no cabbies vying for a position to pick up new arrivals, no signs at all, in fact, except for one..."Main Street." People were walking in each direction, going about their daily business. Strange as it all seems, I like this, it suits me just fine. This is a town who seems to get right down to business. In fact, this town is so small, I don't even need to hail a cab to get to my meeting. I'll just walk straight down the main street and follow the numbers in the direction of the building where my meeting is to take place.

As I walked, I noticed a small Park across the street. I was very early as usual, so I decided to have a seat on one of the park benches, and collect my thoughts for the meeting. I noticed a group of small children coming my way, maybe a half-dozen or so. They were laughing, skipping and teasing each other as kids do at that age. Suddenly, they stopped, directly in front of me. There was no more laughing, no skipping or tomfoolery. They just stood there staring at me. Their faces were very serious, as if something were wrong and needed to be dealt with, before they could continue on their way. Out of the group, stepped one small boy, his hair was black as the night and his eyes were blue as the sea. When he spoke to me, there was no emotion in his voice, only a tone, a tone that was stating a fact. He said simply "You cannot play here. Your kind has to play over there." He raised his right arm and pointed a finger at a tall concrete building across the street.

I felt a chill run through me as I looked over at the building he pointed to. I felt certain that it was the building where my meeting was to take place. I looked at the boy and said, "Of course. You are right young man," adding, "I'll be on my way now." Crossing the street towards the building, I could feel everyone of those kid's eyes watching me in silence, making sure I go play where my kind play, before returning to their own play. What a strange town this was I thought. Approaching the building, looking for the number on it, already knowing that this was indeed the building where my meeting was to take place, of this, I was certain. As the numbers on the building came into focus, I was filled with dread, but why, they were only numbers on a building, nothing more, nothing less. There etched into the concrete were the numbers '666 Main Street.' I reached for the door and touched the handle to enter. It suddenly grew dark, clouds rolled in quickly to blight out the sun. In the distance, I could hear the

steady sound of thunder getting closer, a flash of lightning blinded me momentarily as I stepped through the doors and into the building.

Entering the building, I felt unnerved, shaken even, by the previous events that led up to this point. I was sweating profusely and felt very uneasy, almost afraid to be inside of this place. I looked around and saw nothing, no doorman, no reception desk, no stairs or hallways. The room was completely empty. A huge chamber filled with nothing but the walls, the ceiling and the floor. The walls and floor were of the same color, scarlet red, the color of blood. When I looked up at the ceiling, it was as black as coal, except for two large eyes that were painted on it. However, they were not just painted onto the ceiling. They seemed real, and they were following my every move with interest. Then, the eyes started to blink, to cry and shed tears....tears of blood, which dripped onto the floor below. As each drop fell with an echo, one after the other, through the chamber like room.

I looked into the room and could see nothing but darkness. The walls drew inward into the darkness, a long foreboding tunnel. Then, a voice spoke out to me, only it sounded like many voices speaking in harmony, "we have been waiting a long time for you Mr. Lemore."

"Who are you, what do you want from me.." I asked of the voices, my own voice trembling with fear.

"We are the ones that play here Mr. Lemore, and now you've come to play too."

"No," I screamed back to the voices, "I'm getting out of here right now, do you hear me, right now!"

I turned to run out the door I entered through, but it was gone. Now there was nothing but a window there, which I slammed into trying to make my escape. I could see that on the other side, life went on as normal. People were walking back and forth, going about their business. Across the street in the park, the children were back at play, all except for one that is. The young boy who spoke to me earlier, he was standing away from the rest of the children. He stood staring at this building, staring at me, in fact, and he was smiling now. His strikingly blue eyes began to grow bigger, into an almost cartoon-like animation. Stunned by this vision before my eyes, I watched the boys eyes grow larger and wider until they were no longer eyes at all. They had become two brightly glowing blue flames, flickering an eerie, spectral phantasm. I could see something moving within them. Fear gripped my body, I told myself to turn away from this ominous vision.

Mesmerized, I continued to watch, looking deeper into the flames of the boy's eyes. I began to make out shapes. Forms that I recognized from somewhere...but from where. Panic suddenly rushed through me, fear beyond anything I have felt before. As I realized that the forms were those of demons. As they have been depicted by the Bible, Dante's Inferno, by every artist who ever lived, and by every writer of horror and hell. I turned to run, not knowing where to run, or where I was going. I just had to run, to try and get out of here. As I ran, I heard splashing from beneath me, the kind you hear when running through a puddle of water. I looked down, and saw that my shoes were covered in blood. The entire floor was

covered in blood, as were the walls dripping in it. Sheets of thick, and bubbling up red ooze, down to the floor it crept. There it mixed into a pool of putrid, vile slime. It all seemed to emanate from the crying eyes on the ceiling.

I frantically turned to find an escape route from this madness. Then to the right of me, I caught the glimpse of a woman's hand reaching out to me. A familiar voice spoke to me, "come, this way, quickly." I ran to the outreached hand and grabbed hold. It seemed the only hope I had at this point, so I took it. As I grabbed the hand, a body and face emerged from the darkness. It was my mother, but how could this be. She has been dead for over thirty years now. "Come my Donny boy, don't you want to play with me, don't you want to play with all of us, down here." I screamed in utter terror now, as my mother's face and body began to change. Her eyes turned completely white, skin shriveling and cracking open from blistering sores. They were oozing yellow pus. As her teeth became darkly stained fangs, dripping a greenish black slime. Her hand that now was holding mine, became a mutated claw, piercing into my skin, making me bleed with its tight grasp.

I wrenched my hand away from hers, as I did so, she spoke once more to me, "now you will have plenty of time to play with mommy, plenty of time to play with us all, down here Donny." I noticed movement in her mouth as she spoke to me, her tongue was writhing, writhing. It became a festering ball of maggots. Maggots began spilling out of her mouth, and falling down to the floor of blood. I heard small splashing noises as they hit. When they reached it, they began to grow larger. I could see large mouths forming, teeth chomping hungrily, as they began to move towards me. "Your not real, go away...none of this is real," I choked out in a voice of tears and anguish. Sorrow welling up inside my body, consuming me. Feeling this is somehow my reward for how I lived my life. I turned once again, running in the other direction.

The blood-soaked floor splashing my pants until they were soaked in the bloody ooze. The pant legs stuck to my skin as I ran. Suddenly, there was a thick and pungent smell of blood permeating the air, it filled my nostrils. I could now hear thousands of screams and moans, from all around me as I ran. Hands reaching out to me, claws grasping at my clothing, mangled flesh and bone crushing under my feet as I ran. I spotted a doorway, in the distance, faintly, but once again in desperation. I ran for it. Reaching it, I saw it was a staircase leading down, panic stricken, I started to run down the stairs. In seconds, it began to move under my feet. I looked down and could not believe my eyes. The stairs were made entirely of human skulls. They were rolling and shifting under my feet as I ran down them. Covered in blood and slime, I lost my footing. I was tumbling down the stairs. Blood splashing everywhere, I could taste it in my mouth, feel it burning and blurring my eyes.

As I continued to tumble downward, the skull staircase began to crumble under my weight. I could feel nothing but emptiness beneath me as I fell through the black void. I imagined it to be similar to how it would feel if I had suddenly stepped off of a sheer mountain Cliff in the dark of the night. Hurtling downward, my mind racing to save me from the obvious ending that awaits at the bottom. Beneath me, lay a black void, filled only with the screams and moans of those tormented souls that dwell here. Some begging to be set free from the

torment, others screaming in agony as they were being tortured. And the voices, taunting me, to come and play. All in some unseen realm, some horrific semblance to Hell itself. I screamed in a mindless stammer of incoherent words, screamed for help, screamed to be released from this insane nightmare.

The morning sun felt warm on my face as it gleamed through my bedroom window. I awoke at dawn as I did every morning since that horrible day. Awakening from a night filled with screams, tossing and turning. My dreams were not of beautiful scenes, but of dark landscapes. Filled with shadows, inhabited by people walking aimlessly to-and-fro. On the faces of those who had a face, there was nothing but blank stares. A walking corpse you might find in a low-budget horror film. I did not do the usual things people do in the morning, such as get the morning newspaper from the hallway. I did not make a pot of piping hot coffee, to enjoy with a Cinnamon roll. No fried ham and eggs, washed down with freshly squeezed orange juice. None of these things, I would do as I have done every morning for the last fifteen years. I rose out of bed, relieved myself in the bathroom, then went directly to the living room window for the daily vigil.

As I peered out of the large bay window of my living room, looking at the sunrise on this early Summer day. I could see the small farm perched on a hillside not far down the road. It seems that the animals have a special affinity to the sunrise. Perhaps it is because their minds are free of the thoughts that are foremost in the human mind. Ours are thoughts of personal attainment, power, fame, lust and so many others. As my words of prayer fell on deaf ears, I watched the animals through my window. Birds sang while others rustled for food along the grassy path leading into the woods. It was no doubt a shortcut made by children, as it leads to the street with the only candy store in town. Squirrels played tag up and down a nearby tree while chipmunks sat up next to one another, having a staring contest. I could just make out the forms of the animals at the farm down the road. I noticed that they too seemed more alive during this particular time of day.

I watched the horses moving closer together, bowing their heads at one side than the other of a companion's head. I watched the horse go running off swiftly in one direction, stopping abruptly, and darting off in another direction. As if a quarterback in a football game, evading his opponents, while trying to decide which teammate to throw the ball to. The cows were slowly leaving the safety of the herd of which they had been in during the night. Now meandering around the pasture occasionally stopping to eat some hay, then moving on again. The entire time, flapping their tail to chase away the flies, letting out a boisterous "Moo" every now and again.

Sometimes in the still of the night, if all were quiet at the break of dawn. One could hear the raspy yodeling of the barnyard rooster. The farmers alarm clock announcing the birth of a new day. I thought for a moment how inside us all was a deep abiding respect for the farmer. Their day is long, and their work is hard and yet not once have I ever heard one of them complain out loud about their chosen profession to anyone. Oh yes, they would complain about the weather, too little or too much rain, and you would hear comments like, "If the

good lord doesn't give us some rain soon, my crops won't be worth picken" or "My cows are swimming in mud, lord if this keeps up, I'll be wearing my fishing waders to walk out to em."

However, never in all my years have they complained about their profession. It was as old as time itself, and surely it had to be one of the first professions afforded to man. All farmers seemed to be in harmony with life, with nature and with themselves. You see them walking with a proud stature, and looking at another man squarely in the eyes when talking to him. Always speaking what's on his mind when asked a question, and shooting straight from the hip when giving an answer. However, never forgetting to tip, or remove his hat when in the presence of a lady. I wish now that I had become a farmer instead of going to business school, and becoming what I became. I looked out of the window, thinking back to brighter times.

## Chapter 6: Remembering the Past

As a young man I was determined not to die a poor man as my father had done before me. Not that he was an unhappy man by any means of the word, but to the contrary. He and my mother seemed very happy. I never understood how a husband and wife could be so poor, live in a tiny three room flat. They had to take public transportation to work and church, for they could not afford an automobile. And yet be so happy and content in their life. However, they were just that, happy. I know now that it was their love for each other, and of God that bonded them so to happiness. I knew of course that was not for me. This was not the kind of happiness I envisioned for myself as I grew older. I was becoming a young man, growing out of my childhood. Somewhere in my transition from a child to man, I had lost sight of the reason my father and mother worked so hard. I had somehow forgotten that they wanted a better life for me. Almost as if that memory was blocked out, replaced by my strong desire for the finer things in life.

As I began working and losing my dependence on Aunt Mae, I started to save for college, there were also the savings that my parents had put away for my education. Soon, I would be there at college, business school to be more precise. I wanted more out of life as an adult. I wanted the best things that life had to offer, the finest clothing, the fanciest cars, food, wine, entertainment and of course, the perfect woman. I worked two jobs to put myself through college, never once wavering in my quest for a better life than that of my happy parents.

It is at college where I met my beloved Lorinda. She sat alone at a table in the college library reading William Shakespeare's tragic love story "Romeo and Juliet." I was to learn later that he was her favorite writer, and that "Romeo and Juliet" was her favorite of all writings. As I watched her sitting there I studied her features as she sat quietly reading. I could not believe what a strikingly beautiful figure of a woman she was. She had long Auburn hair, which cascaded down her delicate face and ended in two flowing trails around her neck like waterfalls around a lush green mountainside. It seemed that the ends of her hair were

pointing almost deliberately, at the golden cross around her neck. Her skin was pure and white as the driven snow. She wore a yellow sundress with a pattern of small daisies on it.

Resting gently in each earlobe was a tiny golden post, to which was attached a little red gem. They complimented her hair and enhanced the beauty of her alluring eye's. Her arms were thin, and ended with the shape of two small perfectly sized hands. Her fingers narrow and dainty, surely any man would relish holding one of them in his own. I could not see her shoes for they were resting under the table out of my view. I am certain that they were attached to the most curvaceously long, slender legs, merely by seeing the way a couple of the men were gawking, from nearby tables. I felt a bit of anger and jealousy rise within me, and then subside. The truth be told, if I had been sitting with them, I too would be gawking, although with less obviousness and more self-control. After all we were gentlemen, not cavemen.

When she looked up at me for the first time, and I saw those green eye's sparkling like two giant emeralds. I could not resist her charm and fell deeply and unequivocally in love with her right there on the spot. I will not bore you with the details of our courtship, but it is needless to say it was I who did the pursuing. I will say that Lorinda was a devoted Catholic, and it took some doing to get her to forgive my absence from church.

Over time, she did forgive me, never failing to give a little sermon of her own every Sunday that she saw me. One Sunday, in particular, she took the cross necklace from around her neck and placed it around mine. She softly whispered in my ear, "Mr. Lemoire, if you cannot find the time to come to church with me...", raising her voice just a bit, she continued "You will keep this cross close to you at all times, as a symbol of your faith." Wisely, I did not argue, but instead kissed her and said thank you darling. You are my beautiful guardian angel. She smiled at me and tapped me on the hand, "Oh now stop that foolishness. We had better be on our way, or we'll be late for my parent's dinner. You know how dad can get when he is hungry, a five foot six-inch Ogre." We both laughed again. Her father was one of the gentlest, kindest men he had ever met. As she stood up to leave, she suddenly stopped, leaning against the wall and began to cough. I grabbed her in my arms to steady her, and asked, "Darling, are you alright, do you want to see a doctor. The dinner by all means can wait. I am sure your parents would understand." However, she recovered as quickly as she had succumbed to whatever it was. "No...no...dont be silly. Just a bit of a cold or something, I'm as strong as a horse Mr. Lemoire, and it would do well for you to remember that." She turned to me and gave me a quick thump on the head with her small purse.

We had a large wedding two years later. I was already making leaps and bounds up the corporate ladder, in my dream of a perfect life. Time passed, and we found out that we could not have children. The doctor had mentioned adoption as an option but the idea was distasteful to me. And I made it perfectly clear right there in the doctor's office. I did not ask Lorinda her thoughts on the matter. After my outburst in the doctor's office, it's little wonder why she never told me her thoughts on the subject. However, it was very apparent that Lorinda was torn apart inside by the news. It seemed to me that a bit of the sparkle had left those beautiful green eye's forever. Yet she remained the loyal and devoted wife, never wavering in her love for me.



I, on the other hand, began staying longer hours at the office. "I am sorry dear, but I am the President of one of the largest corporations in the country." Adding in self-defense, "Surely you can understand that I cannot shirk my responsibilities to all the men and women who work there." It sounded good to me at the time, but I now know that I blamed Lorinda for not providing me with a child. I wanted a boy, an heir to the throne of the vast Donald Lemore fortune.

I became obsessed with work, so blinded by my resentment. I did not notice that she was not well. Nor did she tell me that she had found out from the doctor's tests, that she was indeed gravely ill. More precisely, she was dying of a rare form of cancer, and that it was incurable. No, she said nothing but still continued to be a loyal and loving wife. All the time she was waiting to die alone, in our eighteen room mansion. Her only company was that of the servants who all seemed to love her and give her more attention than her own husband.

I never took the time to stop and notice how the light was fading from her eyes. I failed to see that her skin was now so pale that you could see the veins on her face through it. She had lost much weight, even a blind man would have noticed something wrong, being sensitive and highly attuned to his surroundings. He would have known something harmful was happening to the people he loved. However, not I, no I continued to work twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. I was busy you see, counting the pennies and making sure all the "i"s were dotted. I was hiring and firing men and women, with the care and commitment of a true corporate leader. Heartless would have described me better.

Then one day a peculiar thing happened as I was sitting at the desk in my office pondering a business decision. Although it was still daylight outside, there was a sudden flash of light on the wall beside me. It was similar to that of a car's headlights washing over it as it drove by. Only this light was much brighter and stronger, as if the sun bounced off a mirror into my eyes, blinding me momentarily. I blinked repeatedly to clear my vision, stunned by the apparition that I saw in the window.

For one split second, I saw it as plain as the day, and as big as a letter opener. There on the window was the image of the cross my wife had given to me so many years before. It grew to a blinding glare and then winked out, as a shooting star might do, on a clear Summers night. At that precise moment, the phone let out a ring, startling me. I picked up the receiver "He... hello..." my voice cracking due to the mirage of events that just played out before me. I literally dropped the phone from my hands as if succumbing to a stroke myself at the news.

"Mr. Lemore" the voice on the phone said.

"yes this is he" my hand began shaking uncontrollably, a feeling of dread racing through my body.

"This is Dr. Kendel down at Memorial Hospital. Your wife has just been admitted to the Hospital in very serious condition. And to be quite honest I'm not certain, how long she has to live sir. It would be prudent of you to get here as soon as possible."

Suddenly, nothing else mattered to me but Lorinda. I threw the phone down and ran from my office not saying a word to anyone. I jumped in my Mercedes Benz, and was off to the hospital like a shot. When I arrived at the hospital, the doctor on call met me, "I'm sorry Mr. Lemore but your wife has passed on"

The only words I could manage to blurt out were... "Oh...no"

"We did everything we could to make her last moments comfortable Mr. Lamore. I assure you we did"

"Did...did she say anything doctor...anything at all sir?" Tears were now welling up in my eyes, and I felt the weight of the entire world on my shoulders at this moment.

"Well sir, she just kept repeating your name and then...it seemed kind of strange sir"

"What...tell me for god sake's man, what did she say, I need to know"

"Her last words were.. "Romeo and Juliet"

I felt a spear plunge through my heart, and I knew that I too had died that day. The doctor told me how he never had seen anyone take on death that bravely, and without fear as she did. So much that it touched his heart, and he said a small prayer for her as she passed on before him. I stood up from the bench I was sitting on, and told the doctor that I would take care of all the arrangements. He gave me his condolences, then walked away. As I was leaving the Hospital, I passed the receiving desk where several nurses were standing in conversation. They were looking in my direction, a look of disgust and disapproval on their faces, contempt as they spoke. It would seem they had pegged me right on with that call. At that moment, I was full of shame and remorse at my life, and what I had done to my poor beautiful wife Lorinda. May she and God forgive me for my arrogance and ignorance.

It is strange how life can abruptly stop, turn to you and smack you extremely hard in the face with reality. My only regret about it was that life could have chosen to do it a few years earlier. Then perhaps I could have done something to save my beloved Lorinda. However, life never steps in our daily events to interfere. We choose our own paths, and we reap the rewards from them, good or bad. In all honesty, Donald Lemore died in that hospital room with his wife, and I was just a shell of what he once was, or perhaps could have been.

## Chapter seven: The Calling

I cared no more for the wealth, which of course, I told myself was so Lorinda could have the finest things in life. The funny thing is, she never asked for them. I know now that it was for me, to sustain my own greed, a lust for endless wealth and power. To what end has my greed

gotten me? This? I lost the one and only person I loved deepest in my lifetime. My only thoughts were that wherever she might be, she would forgive me for being such a blind fool.

Being disheartened and devastated by the truth of my life, I sold off my entire estate, corporation, stocks, bonds and investments. The bulk of my estate I chose to donate to the research foundations. Most of which that were so desperately trying to find a cure for the disease which took my wife. I kept only enough to live on comfortably in this apartment. And there you have it, that was fifteen years ago, and here I remain. I never dated, or fell in love again. I did not feel anything anymore, except grief. So, here I stand at my living room window once again for my daily vigil which I have done for fifteen years now. I prayed to god, to anyone who would listen to my prayers, bring me peace and put an end to my sorrow. Let me feel the warmth I felt as a youth in my heart again.

That is when he came to me, oh not in the still of the night when thoughts of self-induced torment, stir within us all. No, he came to me as an epiphany, as I watched the morning sunrise through the large bay window of my living room. The sun gently sweeping over the hillside, bathing all it touched with a warm and bright new beginning. And as I prayed yet once again for peace to find me.

He did not speak at first but rather queerly gazed upon me as one might do while studying a painting of some fortitude, mounted under small accentuating lights, on a wall in a museum. I believed it was "Death" standing before me, since it seemed to be what I was really praying for in the back of my mind. He wore no black robe, had no skeletal fingers, but portrayed a boyish face and a pleasant smile. His dress was that of an eighteenth-century nobleman, elegant and yet masculine in appearance. The only thing to stand out in my minds eye was his hair. It was as gray as mine was but with hints of orange and yellowish streaks at both temples. When he spoke to me, I trembled as I knew I was in the presence of an unearthly being, an entity from a domain forbidden to mortal men.

"You have called to me my son, and I have answered your call," he said. "Are you an Angel?" I asked.

"I am an angel of sorts."

"You will give me the peace, that I so long for?"

"I will give you everlasting peace such as you have never known. However, first you must ask me to do so with your own words. You must invite it from me"

His voice was soft and caressing to the soul, almost purveying to me the peace I wanted so badly just in the sound of his voice.

"You mean I have to invite death? I must die to find peace...are you Death?" "Yes, you must die, and welcome it from me, but fear not old man. I will make it quick and painless. I promise you."

"But if I die, how will I know that I am at peace," nervously adding, "I will have no consciousness to enjoy this gift of peace that you have given to me so generously"

"Oh, I assure you that you will be very aware and conscious of your peace, for the duration of eternity my son." I could see that one of his eyebrows rose when he said this, and his voice sounded a bit more serious than when he previously spoke.

"And I will be at peace?" I felt my words becoming redundant, even to myself.

"Yes." He replied.

"Like when I was a young boy?"

"Yes."

"Forever and ever," I still asked further.

"Yes."

I thought for a long hard moment of my days as a youth, so happy, full of peace and wonder at the world around me, so innocent. Not knowing of the cruel hardships that this world can bestow upon one's shoulders to carry through life.

"OK...,I'll do it!" I spurted out like a young boy who was just given his first chore for a payment greater than he believed he deserved.

"Take me Mr. Death, I give myself to you freely here and now."

A thin smile came upon his boyish face, and he uttered a deep guttural sound, a demonic chuckle. His eyes met mine solidly, and I froze like a mouse before the gaze of a stalking cat preparing to play with its prey painfully, before finally ending the poor creature's suffering.

I saw in his one eye, that the pupil glowed amber red as hot coal. And within the raging fire of the iris, was a glimpse into the epitome of extremes, that hell has in waiting. Bodies writhing in pain, tormented under whips of barbed wire, while misshapen creatures danced, an obscene contortion of movements around them. Ugly dancing creatures displaying unearthly features of grotesque creation were everywhere. There were Flames spewing up from the ground, which was in itself a floor of molten lava and rock. I saw horrible flying demons, their arms the giant wings of bats, huge circling birds of prey. Swooping down, while unleashing their barbed whips upon the defenseless victims below. I watched while thousands of poor tortured souls were scrambling about, moaning and pleading for mercy, of which there was none.

Looking in his other eye, I could see the sharp glistening of four distinct ice stalactites. They resembled the canines of a rabid wolf, dripping with a frothing saliva of de cease, and insanity. There within them lie a storm, a blizzard of ice and snow. I cringed as I saw limbs being bitten and torn from screaming souls, by flesh eating ghouls. The ghouls were laughing and giggling, their victim's blood splashing and splattering in a bazaar Mosaic, staining the

white snow. Beasts who were a mix of animal and demon, spiraling horns adorned their heads. Their feet were hooves like that of a goat. They had long unrealistic arms with patches of blackish gray hair in some places, while completely bald in others. Their hands seeming more like claws, their finger nails were closer to being the talons of a vulture. Their large eyes glowed a ghostly greenish white. They seemed to follow my own eyes, as some paintings seem to do. Providing me a small glimpse of the penance that hell has to offer.

"No..No.No....you are not death are you? You tricked me. You lied to me!" I screamed in panic.

"I never said that I was death, fool." He replied in a voice strong as any rumble of thunder I have ever heard. Then, as I watched in stunned horror, the reddish yellow tints in his hair slowly became flames. The flames growing larger as if the tentacles of an octopus, tickling at his face as he spoke.

"NOOOOOOO!" I cried out, feeling like a man who was just thrown from a rooftop, by someone he thought was a friend. He laughed with a hollow bellow that echoed in my ears like a badly played tuba.

"Your soul is mine now and for eternity, and oh...you will have peace alright," adding with enjoyment, "Peace as you have never dreamed, so much peace that you will not sleep or eat or love ever again. This is the peace that only hell can bring you." I began to cry, to weep uncontrollably before this harbinger of Satan.

His appearance had changed even more now, though still bearing boyish features. His eyes glowed a deep crimson red. His tongue became black, elongated and forked, flickering at me as he spoke. The small flames that were dancing at his temples, now engulfed the top of his head. It seemed as if he were wearing some exaggerated Halloween wig. And there was a horrible odor permeating the entire room, resembling the putrid smell one gets when driving by a dead, rotting animal. As it lay baking in the hot sun, along side the road. My stomach churned with nausea.

I could feel myself trying to hold down vomiting. My flesh felt as if it were going to burst into flames, yet it was soaked with sweat. Large goose bumps swelled my entire body, making my hair stand on end. I felt as if it were wishing to flee from my skin. My legs would no longer sustain the weight of my body trembling so, and I fell to my knees. I was kneeling before this accursed creature from hell. It gave off a whimper of victory at this obvious defeat of my powers to resist it. It brought back memories of the schoolyard bully we all feared running into, and took great pains to avoid.

A single tear crawled down my cheek and leapt away from my quivering cheek. The tear falling on my golden crucifix that lay on the floor beneath me, it had adorned my neck earlier. It must have fallen away during my uncontrolled trembling. As it embraced the cross, it gave off a small yet significant aura of light. It was a growing ball of light, bright colors such as that of a rainbow after a violent thunderstorm. Strangely, I could now hear the sound of delicate crystal wind chimes, softly caressing the air around me. And there was a gentle sent of Jasmine in the air, which was Lorinda's favorite scent.

I felt that suddenly things had changed once again, I raised my eye's up slowly. It felt as though there were a thousand tiny weights holding them down. To my disbelief, there was now a third figure standing in the room. However, it was not standing at all, there was no figure that I could make out, just a large translucent ball of pulsating light. A prism of colors too beautiful to describe. I felt a warmth that one feels when standing in front of a crackling fireplace, after coming in from a cold winter's day. It positioned itself directly between me and this vile abomination of evil incarnate. The glowing entity spoke, but the words sounded as if they were coming from afar, not even in the same room. It sounded as if it were coming from a hall, somewhere in space and time. "You will not take this soul today, servant of evil." It announced with an air of authority.

The vile one rose up, growing to twice its previous size. It pointed a red bony forefinger at the glowing apparition. "You have no business here do-gooder. A deal has been struck, and I will collect my due. Begone with you before I lose my patience further!" It screamed.

With that the glowing ball of light intensified so bright, as to entirely drown out the vision of the immense evil towering over us. I had to shut my eyes to the brilliance of the light. The wind chimes had the resonance of cathedral's organ pipes now. A small spider scrambled away to safety being shaken loose from it's foreboding web in a nearby corner. "You will leave this place now, spawn of Satan, or you will be gone for eternity, choose thee quickly." said the ball of light. What was amazing to me, was the fact that, as intense as the light and wind chimes were now. The lights voice never wavered in its tone, it stayed firm and with authority, yet calm and unshaken.

There was a loud squeal such as no creature on earth could ever make, sending shivers down my spine. The room shook so furiously that the walls seemed to be moving in and out, as if a beating heart. I thought the chandelier, which was swirling and rattling violently, was going to come crashing down upon me. Now the brilliant light began fading away....I yelled to it, "Wait!...please wait!" The light spoke softly to me, "What is it you wish of me, my duty is finished here." It was now a small ball of pulsating light hovering a short distance from my head.

"I need to know, why did you come, why did you save me?"

"It was your wife's love for you that saved you, and her faith and love of God."

"But how, she died over fifteen years ago. How could she know, how could she help me now?"

"The cross which was around your neck, she wore it for many years before bestowing it upon you, one of no faith. During those years, it became very powerful, nourished by her love, her faith and purity. She was a righteous woman, a true servant of god. When she gave you her cross, there was a brief moment when there was a small breach in her amor of faith. It resealed itself almost instantly with the power of her faith, but not before the evil one could sneak in and plant two fiendish seeds within her."

"What are you saying?...That the devil did something evil to my wife that day she gave me her cross? But why.... why her, why not I...I was the one with no faith?"

"It was precisely for that reason that he came that day. He had already known that your soul would be his one day. Having no faith, he had planted a seed in you long, long before that day. You were to be one of his instruments here on earth, and you would have been, if not for your wife's love. It was so strong for you that her own faith was slowly preventing the devil from have his due."

"You said that the devil had planted a seed in me long ago, how...when...surely I would recall such a moment?"

"You were a small boy. It was on a day of Halloween. He was in your town for other reasons that night. However, when you ran into him, he felt your weakness and lack of faith. You were a perfect tool for which he could work his evil."

"The priest...oh my god...it was the priest. He was Satan. But I am not an evil man. I've always tried to do good for my family and the community."

"That is what he would have you believe, the truth be told now. You were a young boy who wanted the best for his family. You wanted to be wealthy for noble reasons, but you lacked the faith that would have helped to temper your quest. He saw this and changed your noble desire to one of greed. You felt the power of greed even then, as a small boy. You felt the power as you as you ran off with your bag of flour, your thoughts were on the new power you felt flowing within you. Greed works for the devil, and although you may not have thought yourself an evil man, your actions would promote evil throughout your life."

"And my wife, you said when she gave me her cross that she had a moment of vulnerability. Please....please tell me, what did the devil do to my poor beloved Lorinda?"

"The devil's hate and desire for vengeance upon your wife were matched only by that of his hate for god, and all that is good. Not only was she a symbol of those things, she was an instrument of them, the exact opposite of all he stood for. Furthermore, her power of good was slowly undermining his power of evil over you. He could not kill her for she was too strong in her faith, but he could take advantage of her instant of weakness. As powerful as she was, she could not prevent the evil one from using that one tiny instant of weakness. Although it was only in the wink of an eye, it was enough time for him to do his evil deed and change both of your lives forever."

"Jesus....lord forgiven me. I would rather have died than ever hurt my beautiful wife. I loved her...loved her so deeply. If I had known...if I could have stopped this horrible thing, surely you believe me that I would have?"

"I do, for your love for her was true. Perhaps the only true love you ever felt after your parents were killed."

"What were the two seeds that he planted in my Lorinda. What did he do to her.....because of me?"

"The first seed he planted was to make her unable to bear children, he knew your strong desire for an heir. He also knew how it would turn you resentful towards your wife if she could not give you one. The second seed was of a more insidious and diabolic nature. He was not able to kill your wife that day, or surely he would have struck her down instantly. So he planted a seed of illness within her instead, an illness that would slowly and painfully drain the life from her, and also put her faith to the test as she waited to die."

"The...ca..ca..cancer, h...h...he was the cause? The devil gave my wife cancer, made her suffer all those years because of me?"

"In part yes, because she was having an influence over you. But more directly because she embodied everything that he despised. If he could have, he would have done the same or worse to anyone as pure at heart as your wife was."

Tears were streaming down my face as the truth about my life was told to me, there was no hiding, no running, no denying that every word was true. I could barely stand to be in my own skin. I felt nothing but revulsion of myself, of how I not only wasted my own life, but the lives of so many others. All the time I held the power to so, so much more for them.

"Please..., please forgive me god, please forgive me Lorinda. Is there anything that I can do....I know I cannot change the past, but certainly if I have any future, I might work to regain my faith? I might be able to make amends for even a small part of the wrongs that I have done"

"Yes my son, it is not too late for you, but your soul is tarnished deep. It will take time and hard work for you to make up for the deeds you have done to others and to yourself. You have taken the first step by asking the lord to forgive you, thereby acknowledging his existence, which one must have some faith to do."

"I wish that I could tell my wife how sorry I am for all the pain and suffering that I caused her. To make her see that I am going to change."

"She knows my son. She is with god now and at peace. Do not mourn her any longer, she will live an everlasting happiness. Her pain and suffering was no match for her faith, although she did feel pain, her comfort that came from her own inner strength was strong."

"Do you think...one day...I might join her? Is it possible for that to happen?"

"With faith, all things are possible. You have taken the first step of a very long journey, only time will tell what lies in store for you now my son. Nothing is without chance as long as you are a mortal being. Just as you can be sure that the evil one lurks close by, he is not one to give up easily. You were his. You had made a pact with him long ago as a child. Be cautious my son, not to fall prey to his trickery again. And your wife's cross, it still holds much power for you."



The ball of light started to fade away before my eyes. I felt as if I had been given a second chance, but I was also riddled with the guilt of so many years of deceit, not only to myself but to all those in my life. I felt as if I were a broken toy, being held together loosely by spots of glue.

"Hold your faith close to you at all times..." Was the last thing the ball of light said to me.

Then...suddenly... all was quiet, the only scent I could smell was that of my own unpleasant sweat, as my clothing was soaked with it. I turned my head this way and that, I saw nothing out of the ordinary, nothing unearthly. Slowly, I arose and looked at the clock on the wall, hardly five minutes had passed since I began my silent vigil at the window of my living room. Was it all a hallucination, a figment of my overactive imagination, a photo developed by a tortured mind, swimming naked and unprotected, drowning in the pool of madness? I ran to the sink in the modest kitchen that was afforded to a single apartment such as this.

Frantically, I splashed cold water up into my face. I was afraid to look into the small mirror. It had been hanging on the wall beside it. I did not want to see the image of the man I knew would look back at me.

As I walked back to the living room of my flat, I heard voices coming from the hallway. Unsteadily I bent slightly to peek through my doors peephole into the hallway, I could see very clearly a little girl and two older women. The young girl was of about eight or nine years old. She had beautiful long blonde hair and was wearing what appeared to be a uniform of some sort.

She wore a small brown skirt and vest with a white blouse, white socks and small black shoes with a little buckle around the ankle. There was an emblem embroidered onto the sleeve of the blouse. In one hand she held a brown paper bag with string handles. The bag had a small logo of what seemed to be a small animal of some kind, perhaps a dog or bear. Her other hand was being held protectively by an older woman in her early thirties. She was dressed conservatively in a blue knee length skirt, and matching jacket. Under which she wore a light blue blouse with the collar pulled out. Her hair was as blonde as the young girls, but not as shiny. It was covered with a blue bonnet, she wore conservative blue dress, and shoes with a modest heel. The woman was most likely her mother by the proud look on her face.

The other woman was much older, Mrs. Beckerman, my neighbor down the hall still wearing her pink pajama's, under a pink night robe. She was yawning with a cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Her hair was up under a women's sleeping net, with a handful of stray hair poking out of one side. She wore bright pink furry bunny slippers.

Mrs. Beckerman was holding two small rectangular boxes in her hands. "Thank you so much Mrs. Beckerman, if I can sell five more boxes of cookies, I could win a brand new bicycle. It has real neat pink streamers on the handlebars." The young girl announced excitedly to the woman in the flat down the hall, she must have purchased some of her cookies. The older woman smiled warmly at the young girl. "Now Trisha Marie, you know we have to meet your father soon, we will go out again selling tomorrow honey."

"But Mom, Sally Dearmont will win the bicycle, she always wins everything." The young girl exclaimed.

"Please Mom, just one more door, pleassssssssseeee?"

The older woman shook her head back and forth, fully knowing she would give in. She tilted her head at the young girl in the way that only a mother can do, as if to say "you know you are pushing your luck, but I will give you a break this time around"

As she pulled her mom by the arm, while waving goodbye to Mrs. Beckerman, the young girl approached my door. She began to knock feverishly as if she had to beat the clock. My heart went out to the young girl in her plight to win the bicycle, as a child I had lost out in similar contests to another lad who just seemed to be lucky at everything in life. I knew the feeling of defeat was very unpleasant to one so young.

I thought of the events that had just taken place in my living room and like Charles Dickens story, "A Christmas Carol", I felt like Scrooge, I began to take a whole new look at life. I decided that I would purchase the last five boxes she needed to win the bicycle. Looking down at my clothing in such a state as it were I quickly threw on my smoking robe, brushed my hair back with my fingers and opened the door.

"Well hello there young lady!"

"Good morning sir, I'm sorry to disturb you so early in the day, but would you be interested in buying some bear scout cookies, they're the best tasting cookies in the whole wide world... honest." She said peering up at me through Doe like eye's.

I placed one hand on my chin, squinting and slightly tilting my head upward, as if pondering over the question. "Well it just so happens that I have to go to a party today, and I have nothing to bring." I said

"Oh, cookies make a great party favor sir, don't they Mom." looking up at her mom for approval of her statement. The older woman smiled at me warmly, shrugged her shoulders and looked at me as if to say "Hey I'm only the mom here!"

"Well maybe a few boxes just might do the trick." I said.

"I guess I can take a few off your hands. Let's see, can I purchase say five boxes from you young lady?" The young girls eye's almost popped right out of her head with excitement at my words. Tugging over and over again on her poor mothers arm, I thought for a moment it would become detached from its socket. "How much are they?" I asked.

"Just two dollars a box sir, a real bargain in today's world wouldn't you agree?"

I had to laugh out loud at that remark, as in today's marketplace it was not far from the truth indeed.

"OK, I'll be right back with your money, so don't run off and sell my cookies to anyone else while I'm gone."

"Oh nooooo, I would never do that sir."

I walked quickly over to my desk, retrieved my wallet from the top left drawer, and returned to the door. Bending down, stooping on one knee, I handed the girl the money. She took the money and gently touched my hand, as if to say thank you. Looking at her small angelic face, I could see she had the most beautiful blue eyes, and long golden hair. I gave her the biggest smile I could muster, in as long as I can remember. Watching her and waiting for her response.

I noticed that she had stopped smiling now, and her face was very serious. Startled, I flinched and looking closer at the young girl, noticed that there was something odd about her face. It was something I had not noticed before. I felt dizzy, my heart started to pound like a bass drum in my ears, as I saw that there at the sides of her temples, were orange-yellow streaks of hair.

I quickly remembered the last words of the glowing ball of light. It told me the power of my wife's necklace, it was warning me. "Keep your faith close to you at all times." I swirled my head around to the spot where my golden crucifix had fallen on the floor, it was gone....vanished...the only thing I could hear from behind me was the little girl laughing.

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